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Cipher

by

Laura Michelle Carrillo

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Major Professor: Neal Bowers

Iowa State University

Ames, Iowa

1997

Graduate College
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Laura Michelle Carrillo

has met the requirements of Iowa State University

Major Professor

For the Major Program

For the Graduate College

What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
Adrienne Rich

Even nothing speaks.
Barbara Noda

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This collection is dedicated to my family, Macario, Lucinda, and Steven Carrillo.

*non-/entity**

* "We are women without a line. We are women who contradict each other."
(Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds. *This Bridge Called My Back*. xix).

Moon, stars, and tides⁺

I arrived as Yang-Yee Chuan, little star child,
until the sharp rap of a mallet renamed me
Laura Carrillo, daughter of the bell ringer.
The paper shuffling ceremony made
scarcely an impression; I slept through it all.

I only wanted the miniature flag given
to new citizens. At eight, I accidentally spilled
glue on the faded red and white stripes,
rendering them forever marred,
wrapped around a gilded rod.

The mirror's image does not lie, I now whisper,
contemplating straight, black hair, doughy face,
double-lidded eyes. Where are long, loose limbs,
shimmering cornsilk strands, an angular profile
in the brooding image that stares at me?

Ingrate, my conscience scolds. Wasting time
on petty vanity, a desire for what cannot exist.
Does she, the forgotten twin left in Taipei,
enjoy self-pity like an alcoholic rewarding
herself with one last drink? Our tides once

washed upon one shore, but oceans
and North America now cut a deep rift
between us. Little Moon Child, I have no image
of you, although we share one face.
If we met, would you tell me why I was chosen...

or was it you who was chosen? To stay, to go,
to divide, to add. If I stare at this countenance
will it tell me why I was given to the orphanage
and not you? Little Moon Child, will I ever know?
Some twenty years later, I run toward

a past lost and found in the innocence
of a child-like question: Did I have a twin, Mother?
So simply answered, it has spawned

⁺ "Identity may be defined as "the sense of self, providing sameness and continuity in personality over time..."; whereas self may be defined as "a person or thing referred to with respect to complete individuality; a person's nature, character, etc." (*Random House Dictionary*. 668 and 1215).

unspoken inquiries that echo in my mind.
Perhaps fate cast the die, choosing for me

a journey to America. I curl around
this thought as silent as my flag wrapped
around its pole and learn to ignore
the questioning stars nestled
in evening's blue-black ocean.

Semblance

Image is little
more than bit pieces
welded together.
Assemble the face
as casually as one
would build a book case.
Sometimes, a well-chosen model
appears, a shared countenance
so familiar it draws
like a magnet attracting metal.
In a dream last night
or the night before,
I see you walking
toward me. We
are like mirrors,
so similar our features,
our troubled gait,
our stooped shoulders.
I reach for you and feel
the warmth of my own flesh.
Sister, where do I end
and you begin?

Homecoming

Nine years old, I stood near the shadowed doorway,
awaiting your arrival, my ready-made sibling
sharing flat pancake face, bridgeless nose,
unruly black hair, eyes as dense as wet dirt.
Framed by aluminum and false wood,
the screen's wire mesh dissected my face
into infinitesimal blocks, obliterating
telling signs of the Chinese mask
I reluctantly wore. Twelve years
have passed, and we still carry the features
of cultures too foreign for us to understand.

Come, stare into the mirror. Let me trace
the rise and fall of our full moon faces.
Sometimes, I see the shame flaming
your features, a full palette of red and pink
mottling your cheeks. I too find
a refracted image contemplating me,
a face unknown despite
the screen's once careful revision.

Steven, do you remember first seeing me,
as I removed the screen between us
and walked toward you, my familiar
swaddled in dirty linens, dried tears
lining your tired face?

I do: you smiled.

Creation story

Walls the color of boiled rice
surround you, a rounding woman
heavy with two mistaken for one.
A husband expecting, as well,
the long awaited son
after three daughters.
Evening, humidity crawls
through the room where
we, your night children,
burst forth, twin petals
of an unwanted flower.
He, the shamed husband,
chooses one for the American couple.
As a petal is torn from its center
& thrown into the wind,
I am plucked from your arms.
The orphanage wraps me
in layers of cotton
to cushion the fall.

Walls the color of dried oatmeal,
papered with waves of red
marker rising & falling
as they mimic temperature
& estrogen levels, surround you.
Under a solitary bulb,
your methodically filled containers
of waste stand in shadowed contempt,
mocking your silent womb.
Too bright June sunlight guides
you away from sterile corridors
filled with empty white coats
& toward an overly fertile earth.
When we first meet,
I am a mass of cotton rags,
crying tears of welcome
in your arms.

A lesson with rice*

Day seamlessly slips into night
 as summer sashays through
 the neighborhood. Each morning
 I am outside, gently baking
 under a freshly risen sun. My flesh
 grows dark with randomly visible
 iridescent spots. I watch
 myself expand; my body will
 no longer hold me. I burst
 from my husk only to observe
 the same girl gazing
 at me in the mirror.
 In anger I run outside
 into the sunlight, raising brown arms
 skyward, hoping that the skin
 will melt away and reveal
 the whiteness that I know
 wishes to shine through.

* "We are not so much born with a race as born into race as a feature of our social worlds. Yet our racialized social worlds exert such an influence that we seldom escape the pull of constitutive norms."
 (Anita L. Allen. "Forgetting Yourself" *Feminists Rethink the Self*. Ed. Diana Tietjens Meyers. 120).

Westdale Mall, Cedar Rapids⁺

"You never know just how you look to other people's eyes."
The Butthole Surfers

The stacks of boxed shoes await
eager hands, though mine are unacceptable
to the women approaching customers
who trickle through the brightly-lit entrance.

I know this game; I have seen it played before.
Fit a certain description and you are in, acceptable.
Look like something else and, suddenly, you are
strangely invisible, an anagram of stereotypes

too complex to decode. Have I become
the shrewish fish wife, thick accent
gluing liquids and glides to my palate?
Perhaps I am the yellow socialite,
cosmopolitan in my sophistication,
too good to acknowledge the white devils?
Or am I posing as the traditional *oriental* lady,
head bobbing on my neck like a yo-yo,

girlish smile painted onto my face?
But I am none of these women, if such
exist. Instead, I am one more person seeking
footwear, the officious pleasantries

of a sales clerk, acceptance for who I am
and not the rejection of what I may signify.

⁺ "The fact of one's ethnicity, for any American of color, is never neutral: one's public treatment, and public behavior, are shaped in a large part by one's perceived ethnic identity, just as by one's gender."
(Henry Louis Gates, Jr. "It's Not Just Anglo-Saxon." *The Aims of Argument*. Eds. Timothy W. Crusius and Carolyn E. Channell. 527).

The weight of a stare⁺

Heavy, heavy burden,
your gaze catches me in mid-step.
It falls like an extra textbook
or two into my shoulder bag.
What do you see that so captures
your attention? There is little
to admire within this column
of flawed flesh. Turn away. Let me

continue my labored walk
against March's unyielding wind.
Someone once said that to gaze
is to desire. To recognize
such desire is to become
conscious of vulnerability.
Is that what you now feel
while a mock boredom suffuses
your face? No longer am I
the other caught

in your lens.
I rather like watching
you walk away.

⁺ "Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into non-being, endeavoring me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there...I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together by another self." (Frantz Fanon. *Black Skins, White Masks*. 109).

Native speaker[♦]

Past tense

Perched on a dull orange chair,
 plastic binding biting my back,
 I learned to speak English.
 The therapist's lips may have arched
 like a bow, may have stretched thin
 against each bilabial pressed forward.
 I only remember hollow failure
 when a /l/ slipped into a /w/,
 liquids and glides drowning me
 in their linguistic contortions. My mouth
 betrayed me each time it fell open.

Present tense

The woman eyes me speculatively;
 I am one more item to peruse
 with the lazy ease of consumption.
 She hears my voice, my proper use
 of language. *You speak such good English,*
 she chortles. I nod and smile;
 my role calls for no more, no less.

Future tense

Seated in one more anonymous room,
 the students will witness me
 stutter through the first day of class.
 I will feel the weight of their unease,
 my own growing exponentially.
 Native speaker means little
 in the middle of Iowa when the mere
 presence of my black hair is enough
 to set me apart from the norm.
 I plan to swallow my wavering voice,
 to swallow my yellow fear.
 I plan to demand reparations
 from the pidgin self who cannot sing
 those pristine notes of English.

[♦] "For Pêcheux, meaning does not reside in language *in itself*, but linguistic meaning has a material character produced by the position of language as a signifier in social, political, and cultural struggle. "Words, expressions, propositions, etc...change their meaning according to the positions held by those who use them, which signifies that they find their meaning by reference to these positions." (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back*. 181).

Words to accompany a summer walk*

evening humidity loosens its grip and the sun slips between rows
of ankle high corn

(too much rain, the locals say)
I walk along a gravel shoulder the air
is richly sharp like a blade of grass that innocently breaks
the skin of a wandering hand

summer 1996 at dusk, a gravel shoulder, a raccoon surprised by my presence
it steps – cat-like exaggeration – gingerly into wooded foliage
each paw stiff
in its bending and unbending

June evening slipping along gravel in ill-chosen sandals
I hear them before I see
the pick-up truck, rubber melting away
on macadam and dust, driving into the orange-red melange
of fire and gas

words spill from the open cab, spill into my headphones
little buds sprouting from my ears

Ames is quiet a June dusk devours the sky
in a distant northwest corner a shadow of sunset lingers like the ghost of a kiss
sometimes the words (always lexically flexible)
are no more than salutations uttered by drunk frat boys
cruising the town's darkened streets
their gallantries lost in the rush of acceleration

tonight, though, the words reveal
what I cannot hide, confronting me on this quiet country road
once as a child, I involuntarily glanced at the classmates
calling me "chink"
tonight I am caught in the same gaze

this quiet summer evening in Ames June 1996 a northerly wind ripples
through the stationary: greening crops,
a no-passing sign loosened by a wayward bumper, my midnight
hair textured like steel wool after the day's humidity

they
are gone, disappearing into the crack nested between sky and earth
while I, wearing my brown skin, retrace steps
left in the gravel like small bodies

* "I did not think anything assertive was necessary to make my point. People who knew me, I reasoned, the ones who count, know who I am and what I think. Thus, even when what I considered a veiled racist remark was made in a casual social setting, I would 'let it go' because it was pointless to argue with people who don't even know their remark was racist. I had supposed that I was practicing passive resistance while being stereotyped, but it was so passive no one noticed I was resisting; it was so much my expected role that it ultimately rendered me invisible."
(Mitsuye Yamada. "Invisibility is an Unnatural Disaster." *This Bridge Called My Back*. Eds. Moraga and Anzaldúa. 36).

occasionally, headlights of a passing car
my slanted eyes
to voice
what is left unsaid

illuminate my sloping form
dare the driver

Reflections

A full moon leers
in the rearview mirror,
a face broad and ghostly
in the dash light's illumination.

How often have I seen
that countenance staring
back at me, as if stranger
to stranger, wondering who dwelt
behind those shaded eyes,
what form of being wished to slip
through skin, cartilage, bone?

I once thought it impossible
to escape from myself,
my cage of flesh locked,
its key lost and forgotten.
Today, though, I will walk
along the street where merchants
keep their windows extra clean,
and I will follow that image
just slightly ahead of me.

Her dark hair lifts and parts
in the breeze. Her hands
rest in coat pockets while
her face hangs against
the sky like a moon
too bold to rest.

cleavings[☆]

[☆] "[T]he self most typically is not constituted by the achievement of a distinctive, special voice that separates it from others, but, rather, by the achievements of a particular placement in relation to the many voices without which it could not exist." (Arnold Krupat. Qtd. in *Take My Word*. Ed. Anne Goldman. xxv).

Selling my cello

Once, I moved my hands
along your curved body,
plucking horsehair strings
one at a time, and you sang
for me, a pure note of beauty
tuned to the pitch of a human voice.
As we sat together, the music
enveloped us and everything disappeared:
the folding chair on which I rested,
the empty, echoing auditorium,
the glare of overhanging lights,
and that too simple distinction
between artist and instrument.

To stand with another,
I must part with you.
The photocopied notices
are impaled against bulletin boards,
joining the masses
of anonymous jetsam.
Now, I wait for the call
that will lead you away.
And, when I sit with him,
I will pull my bow
across his body, knowing
the crescendo of sound
will fall strangely flat,
your voice
an unending echo.

Spinster^o

During summer's reign, I donned
 the metal shackle of an imaginary marriage.
 The ring worn around a finger
 weathered to soft leather,
 its translucent stone sparkled
 in artificial light. Silly curiosity
 asked me to describe my husband-to-be.
 More often than once, I thought
 I would tell it no man
 would ever want me. My gait
 too prim, my countenance
 too grim, my body rounding
 where it should lie flat,
 and flat where it should round.

The *Wedding March* incites an ache
 in my head and those poor drooping flowers
 remind me of the dead. "White
 dresses never did flatter me;
 I look like a dumpy sack,"
 I say to fill-in-the-blank
 (mother, friend, aunt, grandmother)
 those women pushing me toward
 some dour man gussied up in black.

^o "Spinster means you are old and frustrated and unattractive and wear your hair in a bun and have too many cats and probably knit." (Cynthia Heimel. "The Lady Killers." *Conversations*. Ed. Jack Selzer. 280).

Spinster walks the dog

Haphazard right angle, her hind leg
rises inelegantly. I swivel away
as she moistens snow-encrusted juniper.
Last mist of urine, its steaming
serpentine scent wafting
through frigid December air,
she turns to me, eager to continue
this shared journey. She wants
only the presence/*pretense*
of unending affection. I am
as cold as the evening's wind chill.

We walk westward, elongated
shadows, our tentative steps
slipping on minuscule spheres of salt.
Can you love me?
She leans against her leash.
No. Please do not ask for what I cannot give.
I ease my grip on the length
of leather joining us.
Run now.

Spinster rues the day she bought a votive

I brought it home,
that derelict column of wax,
and lit its wick only to discover
that candlelight contaminates
my mood with sentiment.

My poor broken heart becomes
an immense hole wading
beneath a breast, under
a chest rising and falling
and guided by labored breaths.
My sweet despondent soul transforms
itself into a vortex of suffering
where I spin as if a dervish
whose feet cannot end the dance.
My lonely self aches to reach out
for something more than
the empty air it displaces.

Watching the votive burn
to a metal base, I know
that cooling pool of magenta wax
will singe my skin at first
and then offer its cool embrace.

Saturday night with the one-eyed spinster

Mother's busty lover stands near the door,
arms akimbo, button nose wrinkled in disgust,
(is it the dust haloing her curly-q ringlets
or just eager lust?), fingers a pimple and taps
a patent-leather toe snug in fuschia hose.
Brother hovers as if trying to discover
the essence of bimbo attraction. Mother
herself, clad in gold lamé, strolls down
the stairs, blond wig askew on a pasty,
pear-shaped head. Her false lashes flutter
from lids lacquered in bright blue.

Winking my one good eye, I offer
a salacious good-bye and pick up
a sweating hi-ball for one last swallow.
Brother disappears, rushing past
the couple suddenly lovely-dovey as they exit
the bungalow. I reach for the remote,
search for some smokes, my dead eye
lost in the television's radiant pixels.

Spinster tells a tale^{*}

The painted ladies suck down their drinks
like sailors, their open mouths demarcated
by waxy crimson layers, teeth flashing
in the darkness of the bar as if rows
of crooked tombstones marking the way
along a scarred wooden floor where they
weave and bobble with alcoholic grace.

Unlike them, I walk with a stuttering pace,
gut held tight against my backbone
while fleshy ankles collide. I can't stand
their flashy, pretentious shit, their know-it-all,
precocious giggles, hooded, intimate glances.

Jealousy? The green-eyed monster
mulching around the sludge of my brain?
A hermaphrodite, Jealously walks
with a sullen grace, testes swinging
against a small slit (better known as a clit),
and when he shuffles through to sit
in my mind, he carries a six-pack of Schlitz.

The painted ladies gape and guffaw
and disappear as I exit the bar.
Then, I tell Jealously to go to hell.
And he's tweaked, says "I'm hurt
by your emotional words." He comes
a bit closer, tries to make-up,
and I give him the finger and I tell

him to shush, to shut his mouth,
to leave my mind alone,
that this poem isn't big enough
for an ugly girl and a buffoon.

^{*} "Susan Faludi has often pointed out that while our culture admires the angry young man, who is perceived as heroic and sexy, it can't find anything but scorn for the angry young woman, who is seen as emasculating and bitter."
(Kim France. "Feminism Amplified." *New York Magazine*. 36).

Choosing a new universe
for r.d.

You would like me to think
 that you're one of the good guys,
 those handsome creatures
 oozing charm with just the right
 amount of male sensitivity.
 You *let* me open my own door,
 pay my part of the check,
 and then send a dozen
 bloody roses. Heliotropic,
 the young buds swivel
 toward light in this dim,
 inauspicious office. I suppose
 I should thank you, grand
 sun-like presence of my life.
 To receive such an offering
 after two dates and coffee is extreme.
 Think I'll be overwhelmed
 by such generosity
 even as you sashay by
 with your latest
 anchored to one arm?

Copernicus once observed the evening sky,
 postulating that Earth did little
 more than revolve around the sun.
 I choose not to be your planet.
 In my newly discovered universe,
 found last Saturday after hearing
 from you, each delicate level,
 uncertain and breakable, resembles
 the layered petals of my roses.
 Guess what? You are not
 among its folds.

Where the cowboys have gone*

for Paula Cole ("Where is my John Wayne...")

Her fist pounds		
a pitted tin door,	against	
trembling in response,		house
in its foundation,	shivering	
windows rocking in		smudged
Dust rises like a breath	their casements.	
then revived. John Wayne's		extinguished,
in a cob-webbed corner.	ghost stands	
to gyrate ancient hips		He begins
encased in scarred hides,	still	
revolver beating out		rusted
against bone. The ghost	a rhythm	
along bowed wooden		shuffles
heels tapping out	planks,	
code: words no longer		an uncertain
their meaning lost	known,	
		in trans-translation-ition

adobe, Creek, lariat, Lakota

* "David Montenegro: Choosing a metaphor, then, has a political responsibility attached to it?

Adrienne Rich: Yes, to be as aware as possible of the history and politics of the image or metaphor we're choosing....A lot of critical antennae develops as you become aware of the amount of disinformation that's being purveyed, how little the conditions of our *actual* lives are reported or represented - what's left out as well as what is presented...I think that there is a way in which that process - 'what is missing here? how am I using this?' - becomes a part of the creative process." (Adrienne Rich's *Poetry and Prose*. Eds. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. 259-260).

Cracking the spine*

He says there is
 no greater joy
 than being the first
 to caress the untouched pages
 of a newly printed book,
 stiff in its presentation,
 binding not yet bent
 in supplication, words
 unread by prying eyes.

He haunts dimly lit aisles,
 searching for those
 unsuspecting virgins
 of pulp and cloth, ready
 to have his way
 with their fresh ideas,

their unchallenged theories.
 He likes that moment:
 hand clenching the body
 of text, head raised
 in the victory
 of acquisition.

* "...this pattern [the identification of woman and body, body and vulnerability, vulnerability and irony] is part of a larger pattern involving female anger at a world of oppressive polarization and hierarchy in which all relationships seem to be relationships of dominance and submission."
 (Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. 103).

Follicles

"Mira que si te quise, Ahora que estás pelona, ya no te quiero."

A woman's hair
is her most unique possession,
Momma once told me
as she combed through
coarse strands softened
by olive oil. I sat still
before the mirror, a self
viewing another whose
hair spread about her
like inverted wings.

Today, the scissors' metal legs
skim my crown
until nothing
but an uneven belt
of pinkish flesh lingers.
Above, hair bristles
in its new length;
I run my fingers through
it again and again, thrilled
to feel its unexpected softness.
Cut locks silently lie
at my feet. I will learn
to kick them aside.

His fist can hold thousands
of individual hairs, each one
curling around his flesh.
Each one is like a piece of me
he can pluck out and discard.
In a less angry moment

he might offer a caress.
Now there is nothing
left for him to hold onto.

Ghost woman momentarily forgets

then remembers to bow deeply,
back bent horizontally, plateau

of shimmering black silk.
Nearby, her flowering plant

unfurls its leaves, those mini-flags waving
in diffused sunlight. His hand reaches

for the plastic pot, a beveled, Wedgwood-blue
Wal-mart creation, and each finger seemingly

is etched against the container. Too quick
to fold into a fist, his hand sends

the organic unity of stamen, pistil,
and roots into a trajectory that streams

soil across the freshly swept floor. Ghost
woman may quake, may shiver,

may feel the pull of frustration furrow
her brow. What comes next is no

surprise, though. As if actors in a play,
she and the man return to their *given* roles,

he a piston of flesh swinging back
and forth, she a piece of raw material

wrought in his image.

My last kiss*

Oh so cool,
metal lips resting
on my skin;
it feels like the moment
after you raise
your hand to strike
me and the collision
of flesh on flesh
singes skin, a hot flash
melting into a cool kiss.

You hatch and rehatch
your empty promises
each time I *provoke* you
into this dance of stinging words
that drip from your mouth
like an invalid's spittle,
of flaying hands that tear
into my physical self.
For too many years
your routine was rote,
well learned. Now, I stand
with one whose
metallic touch is light,
lips cold and hollow
as they rest on my brow.
I cradle him closely, swaying
against a hairpin trigger.

My partner, my *love*, you
already are disappearing
amidst my last kiss.

for Lara Ibrahim (1971-1992)

* "...when out of darkness,/the vestiges of an anger we do not claim to know rise up/in our bodies/ and we seize them and do violence./We all do violence." (Lucia Maria Perillo. "Jury Selection." *Dangerous Life*. 5).

Knitting a death shroud*

Darkening shadows beside and within; emptiness
 like the pull of hunger fills my stomach, but this can't be:
 I am already full. Knitting needles, steel spider legs, rub
 together as I manipulate them, one sweeping against the other,
 dancers dipping and bowing, the black widow racing toward her prey.
 An unformed mass, a sphere of burgeoning life dropped
 into my soil, cultivated by rainy days and nights, my tears that fall
 on the still soft cranium. The one constant: those needles,
 long spindles, long enough to plunge deeply into the flesh
 and tear away the life that will take away my own.
 Still, these thin metal legs continue to meet and to pull away;
 the stitches, each one perfect, stretch across my widening lap.
 I will wear this death shroud; I will wear my straight stitches silently,
 coldly, but don't begrudge me this much. Ugly resentment
 grows along with my graceful self small and silent,
 the glowing sac that feeds upon me, that is me.

* "The figures for maternal mortality do not tell the full story of suffering caused by untreated complications in pregnancy and labour. Though exact figures are not known, it is thought that, for every woman who dies, about sixteen women suffer damage to their health which may last the rest of their lives. Some forms of maternal morbidity cause untold misery to individual women and their families, yet in many places ill health associated with childbearing is so common that people tend to accept it as normal and mostly unavoidable, no matter how severe."
 (Erica Royston and Sue Armstrong, eds. *Preventing Maternal Deaths*. 137).

known entities[★]

[★] "Memory's false as anything, spliced in the wrong parts,/queerly jumping. But better than forgetting."
(Elizabeth Spires. "Globe." *Globe*. 14).

April Fool's Day 1958

for my mother

The fire eats into the forest of my dreams.
 I smell smoking wood; terrified animals
 run in confusion as their world collapses
 into black-gray ash. I run left toward bushes
 which suddenly ignite into a wall of heat,
 reaching for my skin, tingeing my soul.
 I wake breathless, my feet moving toward
 the bedroom door. A spring sun
 greets me on the back porch and still
 I am driven forward, left toward the garage.

No longer walking, I run into its gaping mouth
 where I see the car surrounded
 by dense shadows; the sun does not invade
 this darkness. Softly, the radio plays
 while tools lie on cold concrete.
 An unyielding frigidness grips
 my naked feet and I wish that the dream
 could return because...because the trusty jack
 that always shouldered Daddy's car
 now lies on its side, beneath
 the settling metal mass.

Oh, the hysterical jokes for every April 1st!
 How I laughed when water spilled
 on Momma as she opened the kitchen door.
 How I screamed when I found Daddy
 crushed by his own car. Did I run
 up and down the alley or just stand in place,
 wordless keenings falling from my mouth?
 Momma ran to me, joining the mournful chorus.

April 1st again, and I still hear my voice
 shattering a drowsy spring morning.

Combing a part⁸

A bouffant cloud rests on my mother's head.
 Teased, then cemented into place, her hair
 moves as if one entity unlike the tired tufts
 sprouting from her scalp come morning.
 Those wavy tussles halo around her
 like a drowsy anemone lulled to sleep
 in the ocean's warm embrace. I want
 to take her comb and run it ever so gently
 through mussed clumps, through the gray strands
 just beginning to lighten her brown roots.

• "...relationship is a central term in female identity in contrast to the independence and autonomy associated with maleness, and women's relationships tend to involve a fluid sense of ego boundaries and body boundaries, at least partially as a consequence of the intensity and persistence of mother-daughter bonding."
 (Alicia Suskin Ostriker. *Stealing the Language*. 166-67).

Dissolve

Mother, let me cut the cord between us.
This stifling piece of a shared life hangs
from our twin necks, a double-knotted string
we force tighter each time I try to leave.
I will not abandon you, my good-bye
temporary, a time when clouds briefly
fill a mid-morning sky. The scissors' legs
part the rough braided noose collaring you
and me. Do you sense the air's caress, soft
as cotton nestled against your smooth skin?
I feel whispering wisps of hair escape,
an obsidian cascade. Our lives divide
like life itself; we begin again. You
stand silent, strong. I learn to walk away.

For antiquity

For twenty odd years my father and I sit frozen
on a worn green couch, as we investigate

a button sewn onto his shirt. Hair that will grow
unchecked until it cascades down my back

in an unending black wave now stands
in comically stiff tufts. All knitted brows,

my expression at eleven months is too severe,
while club-like hands grip the plastic eye.

He sits at ease, resting his still svelte frame
against a blanket streaked with orange and brown.

If I could speak beyond the coos
of semi-coherence, I might tell him

such Kodachrome moments will soon yellow
and fade, corners fraying. I might tell

him our shared memories, those prior
to overdue bills and repossessed cars,

will rest between the suffocating plastic pages
of an album locked in a teak cabinet

and unopened for ages.

Veterans' Day 1996*
for my father

You chose to return to Vietnam
for three different tours. Encased
in the metal belly of a recon plane,

you eavesdropped on enemy
communication, transcribing gibberish
into the spare limbs of longitude

and latitude. You once said
you sometimes wondered how many
soldiers perished at your direction.

During a state-side visit home,
you refused to wear your dress blues
returning to rotten eggs

and holier-than-thou comments.
Thirty-two or -three years later, you refuse
to visit the monument built to honor

those who died in that embarrassment
of a police action. Perhaps you know
how the wall serenely wears

its names. I float among them,
so many dead that my image
is lost in the careful stone inscription.

A solitary man, he could be you,
contemplates one slab of black
marble, unaware of tear-stained cheeks,

hands shaking as if in palsy
as they rub against the minute
depressions of a silent line of names.

* "The Vietnam generation was, furthermore, compelled into the revelation that patriarchy disallows: that they had been lied to and used by the fathers. They, the youths, had been used by the old men who either did not go to Vietnam or who, if they went, betrayed their task of leadership; the young men had been asked in the name of a tradition that bound them to personal, national, and historical fathers to kill, to die, and to taint their souls for mystified ideals they later discovered were shrouded in political lies." (Lynda Boose. "Techno-Muscularity and the 'Boy Eternal.'" *Cultures of United States Imperialisms*. Eds. Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease. 603).

Mementos have been left,
offerings for someone more pure
than those of us gathered,

almost false in our sympathies.
Mother discovers an unspooling tape
addressed to a high school classmate

killed at Da Nang. She cannot speak.
Today, a thousand miles away
from you, I am trying to read

about Phan Thi Kim Phuc and her presence
at a Veterans' Day ceremony in Washington.
I am trying to read, to walk, and to ignore

the tears I feel on wind-scraped skin.
I am trying to remember you in your uniform,
trying to forget Vietnam for you.

Hunger

The bitterest moment:
when brother hid food beneath
his bed, so frightened he was
of an imminent poverty, sliding
a wrinkled box of crackers
and half-empty jar of peanut butter
into the darkened crevice.
Mother weeps when she discovers
those domestic artifacts layered
in dust, nestled against
a stack of too-small clothing.

Now, brother takes seconds
and thirds, indiscriminate
in his eagerness to sate hunger,
phantom ache, then leaves,
full and satisfied;
we feed on leftovers
in small, silent spoonfuls.

At seventeen

Even in sleep brother mumbles,
his words sauntering out, falling
against each other like happy drunks.
Hey man, he calls out one night.
Then a laugh. Later, it is a stilted
What's up, so slurred it sounds
like a wheeze. Is he greeting
friends, those bulky
adolescents still awkward
in their new found bodies?

In sleep he becomes the child
he once was, sneer pressed flat,
skeptical eyebrow draped
against his face. Darkness masks
the stubble beginning to mark
a too plump upper lip. It is wrong,

wrong to interrupt his deep,
peaceful sleep, but I slip
into the room. Listening
to his garbled words, I rest
my ear on his chest
where a glimmer
of his former self
still stirs, the steady beating
of his heart.

Summer imperatives for Jessica

(one of the "baby-sat")

Kick the wicker toy box & mar whitewashed
walls with crayola scrawls: bright red
& orange streaks diverge & then meet
along tottering heights. Grasp
the curtain's pleats & whisk
them aside. Stand very still & hide
behind those muslin veils billowing
against a summer breeze.

Break the skin sans band-aid & Neosporin.
Keep moving until the pain slowly fades.
Do not cry; instead, skip along concrete slabs
ringed with chalk & dance among
the daisy's yellow eyes; each nods
a white-fringed head in the summer's lazy breeze

rushing through a canopy of leaves.
Run awry, a bent stick leading your way.
Pick through wildly verdant vegetation. Look
at the overhanging trees & imagine nesting
in the gnarled branches like a wren
seeking shelter from the grackle's shadow.
Stop & let the summer breeze

lift you into the sky, a noon-day sun
reflected in your troubled eyes.
Love mother, she who cannot recover
time lost racing from home to office
and back again. Love her like she's a part
of the summer breeze

caressing dinged and bruised knees.
Show her you care, small snare
wrapped around my own warped heart
suspended in this summer breeze.

Bestow on mother love
not hate, little, mad traitor.

The day Napoleon died*

Garroted in his plastic box,
 he sat before me with still
 present regal ease
 as if aware of the disease
 that, by turns, ate
 into his once bright eyes,
 then kidneys, one and two.
 I placed him in the moving car
 and led him to a humane
 solution: his execution.

Under a bank of humming
 fluorescence, I left the Siamese
 of my mother's dreams wallowing
 on cold steel. Frail ghost, he
 awaited the needle's bittersweet
 sting while I slunk out
 too frightened -- *admit it* --
 too ashamed to look back.

* "It's evident/the art of losing's not too hard to master/though it may look like (*write it*) like diaster."
 (Elizabeth Bishop. "One Art." *Elizabeth Bishop The Complete Poems 1927-1979*. 178).

First date

Frosted blue layers of shadow
cover eyelids. Infinitely black hair
stands stiffly at attention.
The dress, too, is black, foreign
looking on hiccuping curves
that rise and fall without warning.
Perfectly packaged, I wait
in the kitchen, inauspicious
among the silent appliances, my false
image floating on the refrigerator's
milk white façade.

*absolution**

* "the act of delivering words" (an archaic form as found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

Crudités

A hectic second slips by and the touch
of cool metal against skin, against
gristle cushioning bone both is sudden
and expected. How many times
have I stood here, shadowed against
a flickering fluorescent light,
chopping carrots, celery, the odd cucumber
without sacrificing myself to the blade?

So it finds a finger; how does a knife
choose its cuttable familiar? It merely falls
where I direct it: orange flesh,
veined stalk, smooth cylinder of agelessness,
even the wrinkled digit always
too close to the serrated edge.

Lines for a self-absorbed poet

North Grand Mall Ames, Iowa

Conspicuous scribbler,
in the temple of consumption
you acknowledge
the worth of your words.
Those minute scratchings
are as inspiring as the fountain
before you; it is a sad affair
shooting water into the empty air.
Everywhere, a muffled cacophony
descends in its smothering grip,
and the noise is overwhelming
instead of merely distracting.
Before you the rings of water
race toward a polished black wall;
the countenance of each person
is doubled, then tripled
until image is nothing
but a series of distorted shapes
and each searches
for the others like the damned
searching for penitence.

Confession

Those who know me would not be surprised
to find me kneeling in front of the toilet,
lips parted as if I were confessing sins.
Brandishing a single q-tip, I swab
the most intimate crevices and corners,
banishing layers of filth with one
quick twist of my wrist. Cleaning solvent
hangs like an aura above my head,
my pine-scented Lysol halo,
as I wipe away the misaimed, the ignored,
the forgotten, leaving a gleaming white edifice
that even an angel might one day use.

Slipping away

The day begins
innocently: drapes drawn
to reveal a newly risen sun;
a wedding-ring quilt pulled
tightly to the mattress' edge;
a warm shower that spills
from the spigot
as if a thousand small cries.

Little things provide
the most comfort.
The washcloth, freshly laundered,
smells of spring, a row
of jonquils bursting forth.
White as death itself,
the bar of soap slips
along skin in silent concentration.

On the wooden bureau
each piece of clothing waits,
flattened images of the person
I will become when I pull
them onto my body. My arms
rise to heaven as they slip
into speckled cotton sleeves.

At the corner where cars
casually slide away
from stop signs, I accept
a small, green leather-bound Bible
from an elderly man.
Thanking him, I drop
it into the gaping black bag
that swings from my shoulder.

The day ends raucously;
a revelry, a mosaic
of sounds emanating
from a simple wood and stone structure
across the way. Pagan beings
roam a landscape filled
with darkening shadows.
How I hate this noise.
Through an open window,

their voices drift into my room,
each becoming dream-like whispers
that pull me toward consciousness,
but I know they will burn
against the inky black sky:
I sense the scent of singed flesh.

Moving in extremes

with apologies to The Weather Channel

patterns

Two by two, the students filed
from classroom to hall,
a synchronized dance of partners
whose satisfied feeling
of being chosen inspired
a lighter step. They left
me standing alone,
a familiar routine
where palm rose to cover
eyes, erecting a barrier
between teachers
and would-be friends.

high pressure zone

As a child lagging
behind streams
of animated peers,
I learned to move
in extremes:
so slowly
as if the first patters
of a spring rain,
I pondered each uncertain step,
so quickly
I raced through
twittering cliques
like a cyclone in Mary Janes.

low pressure zone

Her body awash
in the glow
of a light's solitary eye,
the dancer savors the moment
between motion
and immobility,
sharing this
with her audience:
still arms swing
into a graceful arc
becoming a tree

jostled by a gentle breeze.

current forecast

When I move

in extremes

I offer no more

than the measured

steps of an Alberta clipper

sweeping the Upper Midwest.

Beware of the less than graceful;

they appear undetected, unexpected.

Caution: road work ahead*

My arms rest on a softly spreading
 stomach, on flesh elastic in its consistency.
 Rising and falling valleys begin near
 the rib cage's end and continue
 east and west. Due south, a calf
 muscle bulges obscenely as I rub
 it along one knee. It is almost beautiful
 in its grotesqueness: soft and doughy
 with just visible blue veins. Clean
 shaven, the skin feels unreal, textureless
 as if its personality were cut away
 with the fields of hair. The distance
 from ankle to knee is brief, revealing
 a stubby, graceless limb. Northerly, the crown
 of midnight strands sprouts and sheds.
 The comb's plastic-coated teeth drag
 through the hirsute mass, pulling out
 individual hairs tenacious like blackened floss.

The body's a map in constant revision.
 Even now, I try to follow the main route,
 the one running north to south,
 or is it east to west? Even now,
 I try not to get lost.

* "...there is nothing in your body that lies." (Anne Sexton. "Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman." *Live or Die*. 64).

Burpee's mid-season special

The cliché says that a person cannot
miss what she has never had,
and you whisper those words late
at night, knowing that soon he
will be gone, unaware of the single stem
of columbine growing within you,
a sturdy stalk crowned by a dusty purple mop
of petals. A silent yellow eye stares
from amid the chaos until the stem
grows weary, until you grow weary
of cultivating infatuation. Tomorrow,
you will take a hoe and gently dig
around that single perennial,
pulling it out by its mass of petals,
shaking off the dirt, and leaving it
on the road side where his car
eventually will pass by.

The iceberg desires its fifteen minutes of fame

No one says good-bye, the day empty like a looking glass,
the sea calm and reflective. Overhead, altocumulus clouds
slowly crawl north. I choose to follow, having planned
to break away for years. Some tasks take time:
the days of consideration, the hours of worry,
the minutes of silent despair. I heave
myself into still water, startle penguins
perched on an icy bluff, and float, all
three thousand one hundred fifty-six
square kilometers of me. For days
people will talk of nothing
but the majestic floe drifting
toward Australia. Those continents
away will ponder my scheduled
landfall, wonder if the earth
will move when I buss terrain.
So great will be the attention
given to my entrance that few
will notice the way I twist
my receding back to hide
the steady streams of icy
water slipping
into the ocean,
children returning
to a once lost
home.

Lines about time

Tick-tocking without stopping,
 a threesome of arms harmlessly swings
 around a glass-enclosed avenue
 of numerals hanging near the print
 of pears gracing the hallway's
 south wall. Traces of sunlight peer
 through parted curtains colored
 an uncertain green -- not quite
 an avocado, maybe a kelly.
 The cat arrives from outside,
 swaggering with bravado,
 fur poofed from ear to belly.
 Keeping time, the trio continues
 its circuit of measured steps,
 resting near an emboldened seven.

Poker-faced, the clock moves closer
 to eleven, moves us closer
 to someone's version of heaven
 where clouds shaped like felines float
 by and unfiltered sunlight spills
 from the above's above in buttery streams
 greasing the sky as it falls to earth,
 to the house on a cul-de-sac,
 to the appendages pedantically completing
 that circuitous, (r)evolving journey.

Moribund

Dusk. Soon we will be swallowed in velvet
 the reach of twilight, a comfort like death.
 I search for a word to hold our moment
 (*crepuscule*), leafing through the good book
 that boldly defines this world. Who can say
 what matter of sound best represents us?

Seated on this stone step, we are just us
 after all. Little luxuries, velvet
 perhaps, maybe pearls, lace deserve a say,
 but the rest? I ask for the comfort of death
 and no more. Posterity in a book
 is for those seeking crystallized moments

captured in typography. One moment,
 though, and the page turns leaving you, me, us
 buried in others' glories. Close the book;
 close it, I suggest. Slip between velvet's
 cushioned comfort. Contemplate what is death:
 it soothes amid busy words, those who say

little, displacing air. Ignore them, say,
quiet please. Look innocent, this moment
 of desired solitude. Is not death
 similar in its soft grip around us?
 We could drape ourselves in fancy velvet,
 satin trains, lace handkerchiefs, balance books

on our heads, imitating those in books
 we read. No matter what we do or say,
 our twilight awaits, its reach like velvet,
 arms akimbo, breaking through a moment,
 pausing, then choosing to encircle us,
 gathering our flawed forms close, this, our death

singular and swift. Do not fear your death.
 It may be more than just words from a book,
 words found in a minor poem. It woos us,
 constant suitor masked in dusk; it may say
 small, comforting phrases in that moment
 of absence. Then the descent of velvet,

death's curtain pulled closed. Perhaps you will say
books no longer help in this still moment
of crepuscule. *Wrap us in velvet.*

de/cipher^{*}

* "After all, what am I but all those other selves that compose me?" (Meena Alexander, *The Shock of Arrival*. 48)

Breaking the code[☆]

Part 1

I am pointless,
a square whose edges
have been rubbed smooth.

Part 2

I am a map
with no boundaries.
My topography is distinct:
rolling hills stubbled
with pine, alder, and oak,
minute valleys of patchwork farms,
and depressions sculpted
out of the loam
by canary-yellow front loaders.

Part 3

I am the piece of language
unspeakable, unknowable.
My words melt away
before they fall
from my mouth.

Part 4

I am shadow and conflict.
Everyday, men die
within my borders,
as they try to speak
what cannot be defined.

Part 5

I reach for the things I want...
but, no, I exaggerate, I lie,
I conceal. Within the territory
I call "myself," I dash my body
against the granite cliffs everyday.
I lose any sense of direction,

[☆] "Fragmentation is an ordinary condition of human selves. The question then arises what response the self should make to its own fragmentation. It may feel as though the different fragments of the being are at war with themselves. Or it may be that some coalition of the fragments is possible...[t]he self that acts and speaks in one role need not always enquire too closely into the self that acts and speak in another." (Morwenna Griffiths. *Feminism and the Self: The Web of Identity*. 183).

the eastern sky masked
as south-southwestern.

Part 6

I wear the shroud
of unknowledge, of distraction,
of confusion, wrapping it around
my body, as I mask and create
the mystery of self.

Coda

I am so filled with hope;
tears leak from my skin,
moistening the pointless map
I have become.

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